

Out of the Blue and Into the Black by GhostGrantaire

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Summary:

Two phone calls and a reunion. (An It AU, of sorts)

1. Nancy Wheeler leaves a note

Author's Note:

I'm very hesitant to call this an It AU but it is shamelessly stolen from inspired by parts of that book, SO. There aren't really any spoilers for it though, and it's also very easy to follow if you know literally nothing about Stephen King or demon clowns, I promise.

Also the characters in this are NOT supposed to match up with the actual Losers Club-- some of their conversations overlap a bit, and they play similar roles, but it really has nothing to do with the characters and more to do with plot. Also, not all of the plots are the same. It's inspired by the book, not a switching of characters, if that makes sense.

"We lie best when we lie to ourselves." -Stephen King, *It*

The spring of 1998 was going to be good to Nancy Wheeler, a fact made clear to her as the familiar tune of Buddy Holly drifted over her radio that morning in March. She grinned and turned the volume up slightly slightly as she stirred her coffee, tapping her foot in time with the beat.

"You say that you're gonna leave, you know it's a lie, cuz you know that'll be the day... that I die," she sang quietly, letting a smile drift over her face.

"Is it an oldies kind of day, then?" Nancy looked over as her assistant Rachel waltzed into the break room and nodded to the radio.

Nancy grinned. "It's always an oldies kind of day," she corrected. Rachel laughed, holding open the door for her, and she smiled gratefully as she made her way to her office.

"Alright so you've got that meeting at 3:00 today, and then you need

to sign off on the shipments for the afternoon,” Rachel listed out as they walked. “And all the paperwork for those corporate changes are on your desk.”

Nancy sighed, taking a sip of her coffee. “Wonderful. Do me a favor and forward any calls until I get this done, yeah?”

Rachel nodded in understanding and walked off as Nancy made her way into her office, letting the door close behind her. She sighed at the stacks of paper waiting on her desk, but dutifully took a seat and set her coffee aside.

The first hour was easy, double checking numbers and reading fine print. By the time ten o'clock rolled around, Nancy figured this wouldn't be that terrible of a day after all.

“Excuse me,” Rachel said as she pushed the door open. Nancy looked up at her assistant, who was frowning slightly. “Sorry to disturb you, but there's this writer from Indiana who keeps calling you? Says he's an old friend.”

“Indiana?” Nancy set down her pen with a frown.

“Yeah, uh, Steve Harrington?” Rachel said the name dismissively.

Nancy felt her heart stop. Rachel was still talking, explaining the situation, but Nancy barely heard a word.

You're Nancy Wheeler, right?

Yes, and you're Steve Harrington. You know we've gone to school together for three years now, right?

So you know the name of every single person in our grade, then?

No, but I would know the name of the person I'm trying to flirt with.

“I've told you're busy but he's pretty damn insistent, he's called back like three times. Now I don't mind hanging up on him again, but--”

“No!” Nancy said immediately, finally feeling able to speak again. Her heart was pounding, but she tried to compose herself. Rachel was just staring at her in confusion. “No, um, I'd better take it. Can you patch him through, please?”

“Sure thing boss,” Rachel said with a shrug, shutting the door behind her.

Nancy barely registered the click of the door. She felt frozen in place, unable to move, her mind a steady buzz of energy. There were so many thoughts racing through her mind she felt unable to process a single one.

Soon the phone was ringing and the light was blinking, indicating a call. Nancy stared at it, her hands shaking slightly. The idea of what was waiting on the other side of this phone call made her stomach swirl terribly.

The phone rang again, and before she knew what she was doing, Nancy reached out and grabbed it, holding it to her ear.

She could hear him. He was humming absentmindedly, a grainy sound through the static of the line, reminding her of the distance between them. She breathed softly, knowing the moment she spoke was the moment everything would become far too real again.

As it turned out, it came even sooner than that.

“Uh, Nancy? You there?” The voice was deeper than she ever remembered it being, and Nancy inhaled sharply.

“Yeah. Hi Steve,” she replied after a second, clearing her throat.

There was a long pause, and Nancy wondered if he was as scared as she was.

“That’s one hell of a receptionist you’ve got there. I thought I was gonna have to fly up to Minneapolis to get a hold of you,” Steve joked, and Nancy huffed a breath in spite of herself.

“Yeah sorry about that. It’s been a busy day, I’ve been working nonstop,” she explained, running a hand through her short hair.

“I’m sorry to call.” There was something deep and genuine in that, and it made Nancy even more frightened.

“Steve, what’s going on?” She wasn’t sure why she was even asking.

Just hearing his voice on the other end of the line made it impossible for her to deny the reality of the situation. She knew what was happening. She just needed to hear him say it.

“Nancy,” Steve said, and it sounded undeniably unaltered to the way he said it fifteen years ago. “It’s back.”

(It has to be dead. It has to be.)

“Nancy?” Steve’s voice-- older, deeper than the voice of the past-- shook her out of her thoughts. She flinched violently, mouth opening and closing as she searched for her voice.

“I’m-- I’m here,” she stammered.

She heard him sigh over the line. “I’m sorry. I know it’s a lot.”

That was putting it mildly. Nancy’s eyes darted around her office. Everything felt foreign, unrecognizable, like this wasn’t her life. Like she was still just a sixteen year old girl in Hawkins, staring down horrors beyond her control. Meetings and assistants and reports shouldn’t exist in the same world as that.

“Are you sure?” She asked him, voice steadier than she expected it to be.

“I wouldn’t have called if I wasn’t,” Steve answered immediately, and she knew in the very core of her soul that he was telling the truth. “I never wanted to call you like this.”

Nancy nodded, even though he couldn’t see her. “Have you called him?”

“Not yet,” Steve responded easily. “But I’ve got his number right here in front of me. As soon as you hang up...”

“Okay,” Nancy continued, letting out a long breath. There was a long pause, but Nancy didn’t know how to break it.

“Nancy, I just... will you come?” Steve implored quietly. Nancy got the feeling he didn’t want to ask.

She took a deep breath before answering decisively. "I'll come. I'll catch a plane to Indianapolis tonight."

She heard Steve sigh, and she wondered if it was out of relief or fear. "I'll see you tomorrow then."

"Bye Steve," she concluded, and the phone went dead.

Nancy set the phone back on the hook numbly, staring at the wood desk. Her mind was ablaze with memories that felt like dreams--flashing lights, desperate huddling in the dark, the frantic pleas from behind her as she shakingly slipped more rounds into a gun..

Nancy squeezed her left hand tightly shut. She cut her hand on a fence. That's what she'd always told people when they'd asked, back when the scar was more raised and noticeable, and she'd grown to forget it was even a lie.

But now she remembered too clearly. She could practically feel the thin metal of a Coke bottle slicing against her palm as Jonathan muttered to her and they'd made that promise--

"Oh god," she whispered, pressing her unscarred hand to her mouth as she felt bile rise in her throat. She swallowed hard and took three deep breaths (*in for four, hold for seven, out for eight, that's it, you're okay Nancy, it's over*) before getting to her feet. Grabbing her purse and pushing her paperwork into two neat piles, she made her way out of her office door, stopping at the desk outside. Rachel was on the phone, but she quickly put it on hold upon seeing Nancy.

"Everything okay, Dr. Wheeler?" She asked, and Nancy tried to offer her a smile.

"Rachel, I have to go. I won't back for at least a few days." Nancy said quickly, and her assistant blinked up at her, looking frantic.

"What do you mean? Where are you going?" Rachel got to her feet, looking at a loss for what to do.

"It's... personal stuff, I'm afraid. I'm sorry to drop this on you, I really am, but I can't avoid this." Nancy explained with a frown.

Rachel glanced over at Nancy's office before leaning forward. "Is this something to do with that phone call?"

Nancy closed her eyes, sighing. "I can't tell you that."

She readjusted her purse on her shoulder and made her way to the door. "What if Daniel calls?"

"Tell him I'll explain later!" Nancy glanced back, pausing when she saw Rachel's look. She sighed, practically pleading when she spoke up again. "And Rachel, before you assume anything, just do me a favor and... don't assume anything."

Rachel made one last protest, but Nancy was already out the door, pushing her way through the building until she reached her car. She felt calmer now, though she wasn't sure how. It seemed impossible, being calm at a time like that, and yet... it was just one more job.

Nancy stayed calm as she made her way home and packed her things. Her closet was already emptied for the most part in preparation for her upcoming move, and she simply transferred the rest of the things into a small bag. She threw in a toothbrush, toothpaste, brush, and a few other essentials before zipping it up and setting it aside. She glanced around, trying to see if she'd forgotten anything else.

As she glanced around the house, she felt a deep sense of unease come over her. It was more space than two people could ever hope to need, let alone one person. She'd gotten lucky somehow. Time and time again-- from college to graduate school to the pharmacy job... somehow everything had gone well. It reminded her of something her grandmother had once said to her when she'd made a rare visit.

I get worried when things go too well. It usually means something is going to go terribly wrong. Life's all about balance, darling.

Nancy's eyes landed on the closet door and the garment bag that was slung over it and she felt a new sort of fear rise inside her chest, thought it was starkly different to the kind she'd experienced during Steve's phone call. She stared at for a long minute, as if willing it to just go and disappear already.

After steeling her nerves, Nancy crossed to the garment bag and pulled down the zipper quickly, pushing the nylon aside to look at the dress laying inside. The white satin folded gently inside, pooling at the bottom gently. She ran her hand over it softly before stepping back and staring at it.

What are you doing? She asked herself. *You're getting married in a week and you're running off to see an old high school sweetheart?*

She knew how this looked. She wanted to feel guilty, to worry about what he would think, what everyone would think, but for some reason she couldn't. As sick as she felt about going back to Hawkins... it was a lot less frightening that staying in Minneapolis.

She zipped the bag back up and grabbed an orange post-it note from off her desk, scrawling a quick note before grabbing her bag and locking the door behind her.

I'm alright. I had to go back home for a bit. I'll call you.
x Nancy

2. Jonathan Byers spills some paint

Notes for the Chapter:

So I guess I should give a small explanation, It is basically defined by it's constant intertwining of past and present events, which is what all of the italicized dialogue imitates. Hope that's not too confusing!

"Home is the place where when you go there, you finally have to face the thing in the dark." -Stephen King, It

"Shit, come on," Jonathan muttered, as he scrubbed at his shirt. He glanced in the mirror, staring hopelessly at his light blue shirt in the mirror which was now covered in bright red paint.

It'd been a stupid mistake. Working in an art classroom meant being on constant alert for spills and other such messes. But the phone call from that morning had thrown everything off. He'd been walking through the room in a daze, his mind still stuck on hearing Steve Harrington's voice for the first time in over a decade, he hadn't seen his student turn from her work station and walk straight into him with a tray of paint.

Steve would laugh at him for this. That in of itself was a weird thought, seeing as he hadn't even thought of Steve's name in at least fourteen years. And now he was here thinking about that idiot's laugh.

Steve would laugh, but Nancy wouldn't, at least, not for long. Nancy would help, Nancy would tell Steve to shut up, Nancy--

"Oh fuck," Jonathan groaned. Thinking about one of them was already overwhelming enough, but remembering both of them... he squeezed his eyes shut, blocking them out.

He ran the washcloth under the warm water again, trying to squeeze the excess paint from it.

Suddenly his mind registered the thin coat of red covering his hands,

dripping down the porcelain sink. He dropped the washcloth, watching as it covered the drain, causing the pink water to pool around the bottom of the bowl slowly. His eyes flitted up to the mirror, staring at the stain of red around his torso which suddenly looked less bright and acrylic and instead dark, and clotted. He could practically smell the metallic tang in the air, feel the warm blooming over his stomach

(Jesus, Jesus, Nancy, call 911, call Hopper, call somebody!)

and then he blinked.

Something warm touched his hand and he jumped, realizing the sink was quickly filling up with water, and he grabbed the cloth, allowing it to drain once again. Looking down at his shirt, he sighed in relief as the paint stood out bright and shiny once again.

There was no way he was getting this clean. Might as well give up and go home.

Home.

Shit.

He made it back to his flat in a blur, handing some half-assed excuse to the principal about having thrown up in the bathroom and darting out of the school before hailing a cab.

As soon as his front door was open, he yanked off the soiled shirt, throwing it to the ground as he began to rummage through his closet, pulling out clothes and throwing them on the bed.

“Jonathan, that you? Aren’t you supposed to be at work?” Jonathan glanced over to see his neighbor, Rosa, frowning at him from where he’d left the door open. He wasn’t surprised. New York meant thin walls, which in turn meant nosy neighbors.

“Um, yeah, I uh. Change of plans.” Jonathan explained quickly, turning back to his things.

“Like, you quit your job change of plans, or you murdered someone and have to flee the country change of plans?” Rosa asked. Jonathan

cast her a bewildered look and she pointed to his pants. He glanced down, groaning when he saw that the red paint had splattered across his thighs without him noticing. He didn't want to deal with anymore flashbacks or memories or whatever the hell that had been so he just unbuttoned his jeans and pulled them off, leaving him in his boxers.

Rosa raised his eyebrows at him. "You're not disagreeing with that last statement--"

"No, Rosa, it's just paint," he shot back. "I just have to fly to Indiana."

"What the hell is in Indiana?" Rosa laughed in surprise, sitting at the edge of his bed.

"What indeed," he muttered under his breath as he began to stuff his things inside a suitcase. Rosa watched with a raised eyebrow before she sighed and began to help him fold things. He gave her a grateful look, pausing to pull on a clean pair of pants. He ran to the bathroom and grabbed his toiletries before spotting a small bottle of scotch on the kitchen table. He gave it a long look before grabbing it and pulling the cap off, taking a long swig.

"Are you sure everything's alright?" She asked, eyebrows drawing down in concern as she looked out from the bedroom. He glanced at her. "You look terrified."

"I'm fine," he answered back steadily. "I'm not scared."

"Oh yeah?" She asked challengingly. She crossed to him and took the scotch out of his hands, handing him a shirt instead, and he realized he was still waltzing around half-naked. "Because I've known you for six years and I've never seen you drink before noon. Not when you were twenty six, and not now."

Jonathan ignored her comments and pulled the T-shirt on, making his way back to the bedroom. He threw a few more things into the suitcase before closing it up and pulling it off the bed. "I'm headed to the airport."

"Now Jonathan, I know I'm just your neighbor, but really, somebody

has to look out for you up here. So tell me what's going on!" Rosa exclaimed, throwing her hands up and glaring at him intensely.

He looked at her, a for an insane moment wondered what would happen if he were honest with her.

(You can tell someone, but they're not going to believe you. You know that.)

"It's just family stuff, that's all." He explained easily, giving a sad smile.

"I thought your whole family lived in Pennsylvania," she pointed out accusingly. "You've got family in Indiana?"

"It's a sort of family," he corrected, unsure of how to explain it.

Rosa was still frowning, but she gave a small nod. After a second she reached up and pressed a kiss to his cheek. "Well, they'd better take good care of you. God knows you're shit at it."

Jonathan gave her a weak smile and hugged her gently before pulling away. "Bye, Rosa."

The airport was calmer than usual, since it was a Thursday in March. He managed to buy a ticket easily enough, and before he could catch his breath, he was flying to Indianapolis, Indiana. He slept on the plane, like he always did, but he dreams were restless, full of memories and old faces and glimpses of fire and fear. He was more than grateful when the stewardess woke him, explaining they were about to land.

He passed by the airport bookstore as he made his way outside when a familiar name in the window caught his eye. He stopped, frowning through the glass. The black book was sitting innocently on a shelf, hidden behind several fantasy novels and vampire books. The author's name was small, and Jonathan wondered how he'd managed to see it in the first place.

On second thought, Jonathan didn't like wasting his time on questions like that anymore. There was no real explanation for how any of it happened. It just did. He'd learned that a long time ago.

He huffed a breath before strolling in and crossing straight to the shelf, pulling the book down from where it sat. It was a simple cover, a black cover embossed with small gold lettering, much simpler than Jonathan would have expected from the author.

“Hawkins: An Unauthorized Town History” by Steve Harrington

Jonathan traced his fingers lightly over the indented name before stalking over to the checkout desk and setting it down.

The cashier frowned at it. “Huh. Didn’t know we had any more copies of this. It wasn’t very popular.”

Jonathan stopped from where he was fishing out his card, frowning up at the older man. “Have you read it?” He asked curiously.

“Yeah,” the old man-- Ron, according to his name tag-- with a snort. “It’s weird stuff.”

Jonathan managed a smile. “That’s why it’s unauthorized, right?”

“Of course, of course, but still,” Ron waved a hand dismissively. “I feel like that guy’s got a whole basement full of maps and news clippings and yarn on walls full of that stuff.”

Knowing Steve Harrington, Jonathan couldn’t really find it in himself to disagree with that. “So you think it’s made up?”

“I wouldn’t say that.” Ronald finished ringing up the book and held it over, raising his eyebrows. Jonathan paused, waiting for him to continue. “You from Hawkins?”

Jonathan blinked, caught off guard. “Yeah, technically. I was born there.”

Ron nodded. “Same here. I’m guessing that book will make perfect sense to you. Just wait and see.”

Jonathan nodded slowly and took his receipt, meeting Ron’s eyes one more time before slipping the receipt inside the book and exited the store. He was able to hold in his shudder until he was out of the doors.

Despite his curiosity, Jonathan kept the book firmly shut until he reached his motel room. The cab ride was long and boring, but he wasted his time listening to the radio and watching the unfamiliar landscape of 1990's Indiana fly past him.

He reached the King's Motel on Sullivan Street before he knew it and checked in easily. Being back in Hawkins put a terrible taste in his mouth, and he felt like he held his breath until he was safely inside his own room. He locked the door behind him and glanced at the clock. He was supposed to be at the restaurant tomorrow at 3, and it was already 11:30 PM.

He sat back on the bed and flipped open to the first page.

Can an entire city be haunted?

The opening words shouted at him from where they sat on the page, and Jonathan swallowed hard. It was going to be a long night.

Notes for the Chapter:

Also yes, there are definitely some differences here. Steve technically fills in Mike's role, and I know Mike hadn't actually published his book, but I really liked that idea, so I changed things a bit.

3. The Reunion

Summary for the Chapter:

There was a pause, the three of them still in the back room of the restaurant, none of them breathing quite properly. And then Steve was leaning back in his chair, his old teenage-jock grin sliding into place.

“Well damn, you’re really going for that whole lumberjack look, huh Byers?”

Notes for the Chapter:

I'll put a tiny explanation in the beginning to clear up some confusion that may occur. The actual specifics of what's happening in Hawkins is purposefully left vague, and it carries elements from both *Stranger Things* and *It*. I try to combine traits of the Demogorgon and Pennywise together to create one weird animalistic-demonic-whatever-thing. It's really not that important, I just want to be clear that this isn't following the actual series, and parts of the past are changed.

“No good friends. No bad friends. Only people you want, need to be with; people who build their houses in your heart.”

“Hi, um, I’m supposed to meet, uh, Steve Harrington here?” Jonathan asked the hostess quietly. He was wary of being overheard, though he wasn’t sure who (or what, his brain supplied) on earth would be listening.

“Oh yeah, they’re waiting for you in the back.” The young woman grinned at him, making a move to lead him back there. He quickly held out his hands.

“I can find them, thanks,” he assured her. She gave him an odd look, but returned to her post politely. Jonathan nodded and stuck his

hands in his pockets as he made his way to the back.

It was fitting that Steve picked this place. Before they'd moved to Pennsylvania his senior year, this had been one of the few restaurants the Byers had ate at on the weekends. It was simple affordable Italian food, but it was nice. Jonathan remembered getting late night meals here from time to time with Steve and Nancy. In a way, this was just like one of those days.

He made his way down the hall to the separate room, which was usually only reserved for parties or PTA meetings. It seemed to grow colder as he moved closer, and he was practically freezing by the time he reached the doorway, and his eyes landed on them at last.

For a fleeting moment, it was like no time had passed. Nancy was rolling her eyes, and he caught a glimpse of the smile she was suppressing being her hand as Steve shook his head at her, his hair as noticeable as it was all those years ago. And then Nancy looked up at met his eyes, and Steve glanced over as well.

There was a pause, the three of them still in the back room of the restaurant, none of them breathing quite properly. And then Steve was leaning back in his chair, his old teenage-jock grin sliding into place.

"Well damn, you're really going for that whole lumberjack look, huh Byers?"

Jonathan opened his mouth to respond immediately, not even quite sure of what he'd say until he said it.

"Fuck you and that disaster you call hair, Steve."

There was a stunned silence and then--

Nancy broke into loud, reckless laughter at the entire situation. Steve's chair fell back to the floor hard as he leaned forward in laughter, and Jonathan could barely contain his own mirth, eyes watering with happy tears. Nancy jumped out of her chair and made her way to Jonathan, standing on her tiptoes to hug him. He grinned when her thin arms wrapped around his shoulders, and he slipped his

own around her waist, squeezing her tightly.

When they pulled apart, Steve was right there, holding out a hand. Jonathan took it happily, laughing when Steve used it to yank him into an embrace.

He couldn't believe how much he'd missed them until that second. He couldn't believe how much he'd *forgotten*.

"Nice specs," Jonathan teased as he took a seat after they broke apart, grinning at Steve and his thin-wire glasses.

Steve grinned at him. "Hey, I'm getting old. We all are."

Jonathan snorted. The way he spoke implied he was sixty-three rather than thirty-three. Nancy laughed as well.

"I know you didn't just call me old, Steve. I'm not the one sporting grey hairs." Nancy taunted back, waving a finger towards her old boyfriend. Steve reared back immediately, frowning wildly.

"It's the light!" He protested, making Jonathan and Nancy both crack up. He threw a small packet of oyster crackers at Jonathan, and they grinned at each other for a long moment.

It was odd, though. In a way, Steve had aged differently than either of them. Nancy looked confident, self-assured, and even Jonathan felt more in his element than he ever had before. But Steve... when he looked towards the table, his hair casting shadows on his face... he looked tired. Hawkins had a way of doing that to people.

Jonathan coughed, tearing his eyes away from the man and looked instead at Nancy. She was stunning, just like she'd always been. Her hair was short, falling to her shoulders, like it had been right before she'd left Hawkins for good. He suddenly felt like a teenager again, shooting awed glances towards Nancy Wheeler when he thought she wasn't looking. But man, who could even blame him?

"So," Steve started. He was still grinning widely, staring at the two of them like he couldn't believe they were real. "Byers, Wheelers... someone's gotta fill me in."

"Can't believe Mikey's married. He's still a kid," Steve said with a shake of his head, and Jonathan couldn't help but agree. Nancy shrugged, still grinning as she thought about her baby brother.

"He's twenty-eight," Nancy pointed out. "That's not that young."

Steve shrugged and took a sip of his beer. "Well I only know him as a twelve-year-old, so it's just... strange."

Jonathan snorted, taking another bite of his pasta.

"What about you Steve? Married?" Jonathan asked, looking over. Steve made a face.

"Nah, divorced." He held up his left hand, no ring in sight, although there was the slightest tan line on his fourth finger. Nancy and Jonathan both made matching faces of sympathy. "Don't worry about it."

"What happened?" Nancy asked, her voice betraying her curiosity.

Steve shrugged, taking a long sip of his beer. "I was, uh, writing this book?"

Jonathan nodded immediately in understanding, though Nancy frowned in confusion. Jonathan explained quickly. "About Hawkins. The weird parts."

Steve nodded, huffing a laugh. "Yeah, well... my boss didn't think publishing a quote-unquote fictional book and trying to pass it off as fact reflected well on me as a journalist, so I lost my job at the paper. Lucy, my wife, didn't like that very much, so that was the end of that."

"Shit," Jonathan muttered, shaking his head.

"Yeah, it sucked," Steve agreed. "Could be worse though."

He took another bite of food, like that was the end of that. Steve always had a way of simplifying things, even when Jonathan felt like

they shouldn't be.

"Nance?" Steve asked through his mouthful of fettuccine alfredo. "Is there a Mr. Nancy Wheeler yet?"

Nancy looked up at him, blinking in surprise. Jonathan frowned, wondering why she was so shocked when they'd been talking about marriage this whole time. She was quiet for a long moment until Steve began to frown as well.

"No, um. No," she answered, spinning her fork around some pasta. Her voice was quieter and lighter, like she was forcing it to be casual. "Not yet."

Steve and Jonathan both frowned at her for a moment longer before Steve shrugged. "Well, it's not you'd ever settle anyway," he said with a grin. Nancy gave a strained smile back before quickly taking a bite of her pasta.

There was a slight pause as they turned back to their meals.

"I went by the quarry this morning," Nancy spoke up suddenly, and both of the men looked at her.

"Did you see anything?" Jonathan asked, figuring it needed to be said. He didn't mention how much of a risk that was, how all of this could have gone wrong before it even started. He figured it didn't need saying.

"No, it was quiet," Nancy said with a shake of her head. She looked back and forth between them like she was mulling something over. "It just... it seemed smaller. Like it'd shriveled up in our absence."

"The quarry?" Jonathan inquired, confused.

"The forest," she correctly quietly as she moved her fork around at her nearly empty plate.

"It is," Steve said, speaking up for the first time in a while. They both looked at him and he frowned. "They bulldozed a fair bit a few years ago, brought the roads out further. They've been trying to develop the rest of it for years. It won't take long until it's gone."

Nancy hummed in understanding, and Jonathan frowned. He supposed it didn't really matter-- it wasn't like he had any good memories associated with that forest. (*Jonathan! Jonathan, I'm right here!*) He shuddered.

"It's just weird, I guess," Nancy continued. "How much can change in the blink of an eye."

"It wasn't a blink of an eye though," Jonathan pointed out, his voice low as he looked at her. "It was sixteen years."

They all paused to think about that. There was something fitting about that. He'd been sixteen in 1983, and now here he was at thirty-two. He'd spent exactly half of his life trying to forget what had happened all those years ago.

"I read your book last night, you know," Jonathan said eventually, feeling the pause had lasted long enough. He directed this at Steve, who raised his eyebrows in surprise.

"Yeah? What'd you think?" Steve asked, taking a sip of his beer.

"It was good," Jonathan admitted. It wasn't a lie. He'd flown through the whole thing in one night. But at the same time, he wondered if that was due to Steve's writing, or the fact that every story and suspicion on the page was something that Jonathan could visualize all too well, even without the help of vivid imagery. "Is it all true?"

Steve shrugged, using the sleeve of his shirt to wipe the condensation from his beer as he replied slowly. "I'd like to think so. I mean, it's true for me. But when half of your sources have been written off as crazy..."

He faded off, letting the rest of the sentence finish itself. Jonathan just nodded, expecting as much. Hawkins had a tendency to write off anyone who crossed it as crazy. Jonathan had to wonder sometimes how much of the disasters of this town were caused by its citizens, or the town itself.

"People have to notice though, right?" Nancy asked, tapping her fingers on the table. "I mean, the mysterious accidents, the torn up

trees without a storm to cause them, the lab that nobody seems to be able to explain... The disappearances alone are enough to cause suspicion. And everyone just turns a blind eye?"

"Unspoken rules," Steve concluded. "Living in Hawkins is basically signing a contract to keep quiet. It always has been. It's made my job hell the past few years, but it is what it is."

Jonathan nodded in understanding, taking a sip of his beer. The room had gone quieter. Each one of them was unnervingly in tune with the others' breaths and movements. It felt several degrees colder, and Jonathan wrapped his arms around himself subconsciously. They'd avoided the conversation this far, filling the silences with talk of jobs and family and lives, but it had lingered there the whole time, and they couldn't avoid it any longer.

"I guess it's time to explain, then," Steve said with a sigh, setting his drink down. Nancy and Jonathan didn't protest, simply nodding and allowing him to continue. Steve took a deep breath, and then he spoke.

Twenty minutes later, the room was quiet again. Jonathan glanced at Nancy, who had grown pale over the course of Steve's explanation. Her eyes were closed, like she was trying to keep the bad things out. Jonathan wondered when darkness had become preferable to reality.

Probably the same time they stopped being kids.

"So how do we find it?" Jonathan asked, looking at Steve. Steve blinked, and Jonathan knew why-- he'd never been the one who was expected to have the answers before. Luckily he was saved before having to stumble through an explanation of some sort.

"I don't think we have to," Nancy spoke up, and both of their eyes flew to her. Her lips were pressed together in a thin line as she stared back at him. She'd always been their leader, always slightly scared to make a move without her standing behind them, or in front of them, and Jonathan relaxed slightly upon seeing her slip back into that

role. "I think it'll find us."

Steve nodded his agreement, and that was good enough for Jonathan. They drifted off again, and the fear was apparent in the room.

Despite his fear, Jonathan felt a strange sense of relaxation, a looseness behind the anxiety lingering in his chest. He knew without a doubt it was because of the two people sitting beside him. He couldn't stop looking at them, unable to believe they were all here.

Nancy Wheeler and Steve Harrington. He hadn't thought about them in probably fifteen years, and yet he felt like he'd missed them every single day. That anxiety-- the type you get when you feel like you've lost something that's going to cause you trouble later-- had faded away, replaced by a deep sense of relief.

"Hey," Steve spoke up after a pause. Jonathan glanced at him, surprised to see a small secretive smile playing on his lips. He held up his beer, glancing back and forth between them. "To the Monster Hunting Trio of 1983."

Nancy grinned despite her obvious exhaustion, and Jonathan let out a short laugh at that, letting his head drop for a moment. He hadn't heard that stupid name since Steve had created it sentimentally the day before the Wheelers moved away from Hawkins. (*We need a name-- we've got names-- no we need one name, you know, to make it mean something.*)

Dutifully, Jonathan picked up his own drink, and the sound of glass clinking rang out in the quiet room.

"To us," he agreed. They both looked to Nancy, who was smiling slightly, but there was a steely determination in her eyes that both assured Jonathan and terrified him at the same time.

"To us."

After that they found their way back to happier subjects, discussing Holly's past graduation, Will's new boyfriend, the Harrington's new

beach house in the Hamptons. It seemed silly to discuss such things when these threats lingered behind them, but being together made it easier. It always did.

“Everyone enjoy their meals? How’s that dessert going?” Their server, a young woman named Jessica, asked as she came to begin to collect the dishes. They all nodded, throwing out compliments and thanks before she left.

Ring! The phone on the wall rang suddenly, and they all jumped before relaxing.

“Jesus, that nearly gave me a heart attack,” Steve joked, and Jonathan couldn’t help but agree. He relaxed as Steve went back to talking about his nephew, but he couldn’t help but feel slightly back on edge.

The phone continued to ring in the background as the continued conversing, laughing as they shared a bowl of ice cream they’d ordered to split. After a moment Jessica came back in, grabbing a few more dishes and Nancy frowned at her.

“Is someone gonna get that?” Nancy spoke up, and the men quieted, looking at the waitress.

Jessica frowned, looking around at the table. She pointed to the ice cream. “Sorry, did you want me to take that?”

“No, I meant the phone,” Nancy corrected. Jessica frowned longer, eyes darting to the phone on the wall, which was still ringing away happily, even after several minutes. That was odd.

Jonathan frowned at her silence. After a moment, Jessica smiled unsurely, readjusting the dishes in her arm before exiting the room without a word.

“That... that phone is definitely ringing right?” Nancy asked unsurely, beginning to look fearful. Jonathan gulped and nodded, and they all looked over at it, barely breathing.

“It’s for us,” Steve mumbled, and Jonathan could hear the underlying tremor in his voice.

"No way in hell I'm picking that up," Nancy shot back, and Jonathan nodded quickly.

The phone just kept ringing.

Suddenly the light overhead flicked off, making Jonathan jump so hard he nearly tumbled out of his chair. Steve reached out to catch him by the shoulder, and Nancy inhaled sharply, a whimper spilling out of her throat. Before they could catch their breaths, the phone flew off the hook violently, and Nancy yelped. The phone fell towards the floor and hung there, dangling at the end of the cord.

There was a moment of baited silence and then--

"Nancy! Nancy! Where are you?"

Nancy let out a breathy cry as the voice of her best friend rang out. Her best friend that had been dead for the past sixteen years.

Jonathan felt the blood rush from his face, and if it wasn't for Steve's tight grip on his shoulder, he felt like he would've passed out.

"Oh my god--" Nancy whimpered, and Jonathan looked at her quickly.

"Nancy, it's not her."

"I know," Nancy moaned, unable to take her eyes off the phone. "I know."

"Nancy," Barb's voice sobbed on the other line, and there was a loud growling sound that made them all flinch. Then Barb began to scream, terrible, desperate noises full of pain and agony. Nancy was crying openly, tears streaming down her face, and even Jonathan felt himself tear up at the noises.

And then it stopped.

"Jonathan?" A voice whimpered out, and Jonathan choked. "Jonathan, are you there?"

"Will," he whispered hoarsely. Faintly he felt Nancy reach out and

grabbed a hold of his hand, but all could focus on was the sound of Will.

“Jonathan please, don’t leave me here, it’s dark, it’s so dark!” Will sobbed.

It wasn’t his Will. He knew that. He’d talked to his brother three days ago. Will Byers was alive and well, twenty eight years old and living in Pittsburgh. Jonathan knew this, and yet...

There was something so unnerving about that voice, that twelve-year-old kid shouting for help.

“You’re supposed to be my brother, you’re supposed to help me, why won’t you help me?” Will screamed, and Jonathan squeezed his hands around seat of his chair to ground him. He wanted to shout back, but he knew it wouldn’t help. “You’re letting me DIE! And you’re going to die too! You’re going to die too!”

Jonathan was seconds away from running from the room when it quieted again. Nancy and Jonathan’s eyes both shot to Steve, who was staring in horror at the telephone line. Jonathan didn’t know what came next. He couldn’t predict it. And then...

“How could you, Steve?”

Jonathan’s eyes flew to Nancy, but she hadn’t spoken. She was still staring with wide eyes at the phone, and *oh*, now he understood.

“How could you do this to us?” Nancy’s voice rang out again, but it was bitter and angry, and everything Nancy could be at her worst. “We were better off before you.”

Steve was shaking his head slowly. Jonathan was about to reach other, grab his hand like Nancy had grabbed his when another voice spoke up.

“You’re going to get us killed, Steve.” Jonathan stared at the phone. The voice speaking was unmistakably his, but he couldn’t remember a time he’d sounded that furious. “Everything that happens here is your fault.”

Steve had gone deathly pale, and Jonathan didn't blame him.

"You shouldn't have called us, you should have *never* called us," Jonathan's voice spoke up again, getting louder and louder with each word. Nancy's voice joined in over the phone, and they called out in sick, synchronized harmony. "You're going to get us killed, you're going to kill us, you should have just left us ALONE--"

Everything stopped at once, and it took Jonathan a moment to realize why. He blinked and looked around, seeing Steve and Nancy both staring at him with horrified expressions. He looked down at himself and realized with a start that he'd run to the phone and thrown it back on the hook without even realizing what he'd done.

The lights flickered back on, and they all looked around, taking deep breaths.

"Holy shit," Nancy muttered. "Holy *shit*."

Jonathan raked a hand over his face. He tried not to think of what his voice had said over the phone. He tried not to think of how maybe, maybe, part of him agreed with it. He felt sick.

Unsteadily, he made his way back to the table, collapsing in the chair. Steve hadn't said a word or moved an inch since the call ended. Nancy was trembling violently, tears still racing down her face, but Jonathan figured they had less to do with misery and more to do with shock.

"I guess you were right about it finding us, huh Nance?" Jonathan whispered hoarsely, his eyes flickering back to the phone, which now sat patient, silent, and still.

Steve let out a shaky breath, pulling off his glasses and rubbing his eyes tiredly. "I've suddenly lost my appetite," he explained, pushing the ice cream bowl away from him. Nancy and Jonathan stared at it in distaste.

"So. That's what we're dealing with," Nancy surmised, her voice only slightly calmer. Both of the men glanced at her, and she stared back.

"You know... it was right about some things," Nancy started slowly.

Steve flinched violently, and Nancy's hands flew out to grab his. "*Not that*. It wasn't right about that. But the truth is, there's no guarantee we're going to make it. It...it *could* kill us."

The shaky words hung in the air like smoke, making it impossible to breathe easily.

"Or *we* kill it," Jonathan pointed out quietly, and they both nodded absently. Even the idea of killing it, once and for all, seemed scary. After this, what came next? What followed after this thing was dead?

Steve sighed, removing his hands from Nancy's as he sat up straighter. He slipped his glasses back on and looked at both of them. There was fear covering his face, but with that fear came a sort of bravery that Steve had always been able to pull off. After all, he was the one who stayed. For sixteen years, Steve had always stayed.

"So the question is... do we forget it, or do we finish it? One way or..." Steve's voice broke, and he took a second. "Or the other."

Nobody moved. Jonathan didn't dare to. Back when he was sixteen, this whole thing had seemed so simple. Fight the monster, win the battle. He hadn't even realized it had been a choice. Maybe it hadn't been.

Maybe it should have been just as simple this time around, but Jonathan was startlingly aware that all he had to do was leave, hop back on a plane to New York, and come sixteen years later, he would forget about it all again.

"I want to finish what we started." Nancy said suddenly and they both looked to her. Jonathan knew the words before she spoke them. He remembered them from all those years ago, and he knew immediately that there was no way any of them were walking away from this. "I want to kill it."

Notes for the Chapter:

And that's the end of that! I know it's quite a bit of a cliffhanger, but if I wrote the rest of it, I think it'd turn into a novel. A 444,414 word novel, to be exact.

Author's Note:

Yes I wrote this entire thing because I reread the part in the novel about the blood promise from the Coke bottles I was like "haha that's kind of like Nancy and Jonathan's matching scars."